

September 28, 2016

The Honorable Robert A. McDonald  
Department of Veterans Affairs  
810 Vermont Avenue NW  
Washington, DC 20420

Dear Secretary McDonald,

As follow up to our phone conversation last week, I write to reiterate that you should use your ability as the Secretary of Veterans Affairs to terminate Mr. Christopher Wirtjes from his post at Edward Hines Jr. VA Hospital in Hines, Illinois.

As I wrote to you on September 1, 2016, whistleblowers came to me last month reporting that the remains of indigent veterans, or those without next of kin, were left in the Hines VA morgue for inappropriate amounts of time following their death. At times, the remains of these veterans were left to badly decompose in the Hines morgue for upwards of 30 plus days before being properly released to a local funeral home for a dignified burial or cremation. At the time of my letter, the remains of two veterans had sat in the Hines VA morgue without any post mortem care for over 45 days. This is unacceptable.

These whistleblowers, who wish to remain anonymous for fear of retaliation and losing their jobs, brought forward information identifying Mr. Wirtjes, Chief, Patient Administrative Services (PAS), as the person responsible for this unacceptable situation. Mr. Wirtjes, according to whistleblowers, fails to do his duty of ensuring timely and respectful burials for our indigent veterans, and veterans without next of kin. Emails provided to my office show efforts by VA staff to get proper and timely approval of paperwork failed, despite available funds and an internal operating procedure to procure payment that is known and should be in place. The whistleblowers also state Mr. Wirtjes does not have a contract with an established funeral home to transport the unclaimed remains to be prepared for burial, per normal operating procedure.

I find this behavior unacceptable and another exhausting example of a culture of malfeasance and corruption at Hines.

This is not the first time Mr. Wirtjes has failed to perform his duties. The Office of Special Counsel's letter to the President from February 25, 2016 specifically named him as the manager who directed staff to manipulate patient appointments, directed staff to zero out patient wait times and directed the use of a separate Excel spreadsheet to track appointments. This resulted in a false appearance of acceptable wait times and masked significant delays in veterans' access to care.

Specifically, the Office of Special Counsel Analysis titled OSC File No. DI-14-2762 (Hines VA Hospital, Chicago, Illinois) regarding the VA's Office of Inspector General (OIG) investigations on manipulated wait times raised by whistleblowers states that the VA "OIG found only one manager, patient administrative services (PAS) chief Christopher Wirtjes, responsible for implementing these improper practices."

As a result, Mr. Wirtjes was merely given a 14-day administrative leave for his role in the scheduling manipulations. To add insult to injury, whistleblowers have informed my office that Mr. Wirtjes responded to this punishment by taking an additional 2-week vacation and upon his return continuously bragged about his VA commissioned "vacation."

The OSC analysis also stated that the OIG investigation confirmed that a senior manager instructed schedulers to manipulate scheduling data to hide the actual wait times experienced by veterans, however it provided no information on how the manipulations impacted veterans, and failed to provide corrective action. Is Mr. Wirtjes continuing to direct schedulers to manipulate wait times for care at Hines VA?

While manipulating the wait time for several departments according to the VA's own OIG investigation is unspeakable, continuing to leave in place a corrupt and inept chain of command to continue to harm our veterans, like leaving our unclaimed and indigent veterans in the morgue, is unforgivable. I find it irresponsible that the VA has left the one manager finger pointed as the mastermind of the manipulated scheduling practices in a position to continue overseeing scheduling, patient administration, health information management and decedent affairs.

Mr. Wirtjes must be held accountable now. Otherwise the corrupt culture of the VA will be justified and encouraged.

You have the ability to fire VA employees for misconduct. Congress gave you that power in Public Law 113-146. If manipulating scheduling wait times putting veterans' health at risk and failing to allow the burial of unclaimed veterans' remains is not misconduct, then I ask you what is. If you cannot make this happen within the next 30-days then I would like an explanation to Congress and 700,000 Illinois veterans.

America was built on the sacrifices of our service members. And as a grateful nation, we are indebted to our veterans who unselfishly served to fight for the freedoms we enjoy. No veteran who has served should be left for weeks without a proper and dignified burial.

Sincerely,



Mark Kirk  
United States Senate

Enclosures:

OSC Letter to President, February 25, 2016

Letter to Secretary, September 1, 2016

cc: Steven Braverman, Director, Hines VA